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# The Southern American Belle: History, Evolution, and Perceptions in Contemporary Culture

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**The Southern American Belle: History, Evolution, and Perceptions in Contemporary**

**Culture**

**By**

**H. Blythe Vickery**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College**

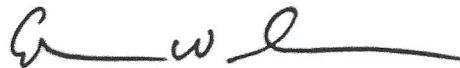
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Abstract**

This research study seeks to examine the concept of the southern belle and to provide greater insight into how the southern belle is perceived by those today as a means of describing contemporary southern womanhood and culture. Chapter 1 traces the history of the southern belle from its pre-Civil War roots, through the turmoil of the Civil War, and up through post-war Reconstruction and beyond, thereby situating the concept of the southern belle within the context of southern history. Utilizing a socio-linguistic approach, Chapter 2 explains the research methodology of this study where two group interviews were conducted and where participants responded to questions probing for their current perceptions of who and what constitutes a southern belle in modern culture. Participant responses were then analyzed using evaluative discourse analysis techniques. Chapter 3 discusses the results of the group interview analysis by placing the data in conversation with historical perspectives on the southern belle and analyzing trends in the data between study participants. This study then concludes by suggesting a definition for the modern southern belle which encompasses both the original, historic definition of the belle and modern perceptions of what the belle is today in order to offer insight into one potential lense through which to view women of the American South.

## Introduction



Fig. 1. Cover picture of *Harper's Weekly*, September 7, 1861, depicting a "southern belle."

*Scarlett: What do you want?*

*Rhett: I'll tell you, Scarlett O'Hara, if you'll take that southern-belle simper off your face. Someday I want you to say to me the words that you said to Ashley Wilkes: "I love you!"*

*Scarlett: That's something you'll never hear from me, Captain Butler, as long as you live.*

- *Gone with the Wind* (1939 film)

Today, the phrase "southern belle" evokes ambivalent images of the Antebellum American South with attractive, white women in large hoop-skirts, speaking with southern drawls, and living in grandiose plantation houses (see fig. 1). This image captures the idea that the southern belle is a historical figure from the past; yet, the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses the present tense in its definition. It describes the southern belle as "an attractive, typically upper-class woman from the Southern states of the United States, *esp.* one perceived as having a wild, flirtatious, or steely character concealed beneath an outwardly demure appearance" (*OED Online*). According to current research on this topic<sup>1</sup>, the person of the southern belle died

<sup>1</sup> Historian Anya Jabour argues that the historical person of the southern belle evolved into the concept of the "she-rebel" with the outbreak of the Civil War (Jabour 1).



alongside the Old South, yet we currently possess a definition which suggests that the southern belle describes a person today. The evolution of the term “southern belle” from its historical origins to its contemporary definition, has been guided by historical events that also shaped the southeast region of the United States. By analyzing the history, ideologies, and culture of the South, we can better understand what constitutes a southern belle in modern culture. Because of the close ties between the historic belle and the ideology of slavery on which she depended for her being, having a better understanding of how people perceive the belle in today’s society and culture may offer unique insight into modern ideologies and anxieties of the South. Utilizing methods of discourse analysis to find trends in current perceptions of the southern belle, this study aims to determine how the southern belle became a term which transcends its historical contexts to remain in linguistic use today, how modern thought perceives the belle, and why our current *OED* definition only offers one perception of what comprises a “modern” southern belle. Tracing the narrative of the southern belle over the course of history will offer a glimpse into this concept’s lasting impact on contemporary American culture.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Origin & Perspectives**

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first written record of the southern belle as a term occurred in 1824 in a compilation of fictional sketches entitled, *Tales of the American Landlord*<sup>2</sup> (*OED Online*). Yet before a term can be written down by an author in order to describe a specific idea to a reader, that idea must first be accepted and understood by the perceived audience. This indicates that the concept of the “southern belle” circulated for some

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Historian Giselle Roberts also makes a similar argument by outlining how the Civil War drastically changed southern women’s roles and the definition of the belle as a result (Roberts 199).

<sup>2</sup> Southern belle is used in this specific context to describe Miss Maria Belacour, considered one of the “most beautiful and accomplished girls south of the Potomac” (*Tales of an American Landlord* 156).

time before 1824 and possibly even before the end of the eighteenth century. An 1850s etiquette book for women written by Caroline Kirkland, entitled *Evening Talk*, describes a “modern belle” in her writing. Charles Scribner of New York published Mrs. Kirkland’s manner book which guaranteed that her text would reach more than just a southern audience. Thus, the term “belle” must have been known by many women regardless of region (Kirkland xiv). Her use of this word suggests two very important points concerning the southern belle: first of all, that a “belle” could be any lady in the country at this time, regardless of where she lived. Secondly, the use of the word “modern” before “belle” indicates that this term was used frequently to describe women before the 1850s, and thus, must have been in use much earlier than the end of the nineteenth century. The *OED* supports this as well, for a belle could historically be used to signify women who were regarded as “reigning beauties” or “fair lad[ies]” as early as the 1640s (*OED Online*). The definition then implies that the “southern belle,” as a complete phrase, originated as an offshoot of the original “belle” in order to describe southern women in particular.

The culture and region of the south had a direct impact on the term’s meaning in order for the word “southern” to become a qualifier for women considered “belles” in that society. The historic definition of the southern belle, however, was quite different from that of the current *OED*’s, and indicates a shift in this term’s meaning over the years. Notably, the *OED*’s current definition does not address the southern belle’s race, education (although possibly implied by “upper-class”), or her attributes as a young, single woman. For the historical southern belle was white, wealthy, of courting age, and educated. The person of the southern belle died alongside the institution of slavery, which supported her very position <sup>3</sup>. A southern belle, as she existed pre-war, did not and could not exist anymore. The concept of the southern belle was then reborn

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<sup>3</sup> “This definition drastically changed, however, when the foundations of their very existence shifted with the outbreak of the Civil War” (Roberts 199).

as a remembrance of the Old South as southern women had to adjust to a new way of life in the wake of their crumbling traditional lifestyles. The shift of this term's meaning marks not only a change in the culture and society of the South, but also in the ideologies of a people as they had to grapple with constructing a new society not built upon human chattel. Understanding both the historical figure of the southern belle and also the evolution of the southern belle from a person to a *concept*, becomes imperative when investigating how exactly this term defines people and culture today.

### **Mosaic of the South: The Land of Cotton, The Confederacy, and the Lost Cause**

The American South outlines a complex region as defined by its societal, racial, and economic structures. According to historian Edward Pessen, it is essential to realize that “all powerful, complex, and viable contemporaneous societies are likely to converge or be similar in some respects, dissimilar in others” (Pessen 1121). This does not ring truer than for the northern and southern regions of the United States. While the North and South had strong claims on each other's commerce and industry, their differences concerning the South's institution of slavery, the very backbone of commerce and industry in the South, flamed a conflict which would claim the lives of many men from each region. Thus, the Civil War and its aftermath drastically changed the structure of the South as its slaves were freed, its plantations disabled, and its economy crippled. This shift in the society and culture of the South marks the very event which would change the southern belle from a person to a concept.

### **The Land of Cotton**

Because of some ideological differences between the northern and southern regions of the United States based on the institution of slavery, the culture of the South was fundamentally different from that in the North. For the North, although not exempt of racism, banned human



bondage, while the South embraced slavery as a part of its way of life. Thus, southern culture, as informed by slavery, specifically shaped the “belle” of the Antebellum era. In fact, the person of the southern belle is so embedded within old southern society and slavery, that the belle’s goal in life was none other than to marry a wealthy plantation owner and continue a family line which would continually support that very institution (Clinton 36). The Antebellum South, and its economy, as built upon the backs of slaves, served as a catalyst through which white women of high social status were held in their place and were bound by the same structures which gave them their very rank, position, and prominence in society. Notable historian, Catherine Clinton, speaks to the southern woman’s role in the Antebellum era when she states, “[she] found herself trapped within a system over which she had no control...no means of escape. Cotton was King, white men ruled, and both white women and slaves served the same master” (Clinton 35). At this moment in time, females were constrained by their gender roles and the patriarchal structures of their society, which demanded their homage. Although their experiences were almost luxurious compared to the experiences of the slaves, women were also demeaned by the male plantation owner. For women, “King Cotton,” the largest crux of economic stability in the South, and the task master of the slaves, bound them as well by stifling their independence and tying their fate to a wealthy plantation master through marriage. While the plantation system flourished and the belle’s highest aspiration was to marry well and become a plantation “mistress,” a belle was expected to talk, behave, and live as befitting a pure, demure member of society (Roberts 15). Not until the outbreak of the Civil War did this expectation begin to change.

### **The Confederacy**

The rise of the Confederate South brought many changes to the culture and society in which the southern belle lived. Gone were the laid-back days of garden parties and leisure, for

with the men away at war, the women were required to work, provide, protect, and sustain what the men left behind. Not only did the war draw a significant portion of the male population from the South, but it also drained the economy as money was needed to support the war efforts (Currie 29-33). According to historian Nicholas Vail, “slavery was both the material and ideological foundation of Southern Society” (Vail). The importance of slavery to the South’s economy, livelihood, and culture explains why the Confederacy so strongly fought against its Northern counterpart who threatened to free their slaves and reorganize their societal framework without the foundation of slavery included. The ideology of slavery was so intricately woven into the southern culture of that time that the belle found her very being shaken by the change both the war and Emancipation introduced. Instead, the sweet, submissive belle became a figure of rebellion in an effort to preserve the society from whence she came.

### **The Lost Cause, Reconciliation, and Beyond**

With the devastation of the Civil War and the hardships of southern reconstruction following its end ever present in the minds of both northerners and southerners, a call for reconciliation between the two sister regions created an environment where southern ideology was forced to change. Since slavery could no longer be the cornerstone of the South, southerners began to search for a way to preserve their culture without appearing inhumane and cruel according to the rest of the United (once again) States’ anti-slavery stance. Therefore, the emergence of “machines, rapid urbanization, and labor unrest,” as a result of the war, “produced a huge audience for literature of escape into a pre-Civil War, exotic South that, all but ‘lost’ was now the object of enormous nostalgia” (Blight 211). The medium of print and the persuasive language of “Lost Cause” narratives painted the South not as the terrible task-master or the sad loser of a massive war, but as a symbol of a passing generation and a way of life that sadly could



be attained no more. Such narratives with their happy-to-be-enslaved slaves, their benevolent masters, and sweet and pure southern ladies often included intersectional marriages between the North and South to create a unifying message of peace in the aftermath of the war (217). Yet not all writers were satisfied pacifying the South and allowing a society, still, in many regards built upon white supremacy, to quietly lick its wounds. During the early 1930s, a group of writers began to turn the tide of Southern romanticism by creating a world of “gloom, peopled by demented characters, who lived in crumbling mansions” (Langman xii). By this point in time, the perceptions of the South had come full circle; no longer was the South simply perceived as free of care and as a pillar to all traditions and grace, but also perceived as a cold and decaying place with numerous sins blotting its existence. In this way, the southern “belle,” or a young woman considered a belle before the beginning of the war, also began to embody authors’ attitudes towards the South. The ever-changing characterizations of “southern belle” figures provide an explanation for how and why the concept of the southern belle may differ from its historical antebellum definition and how it continues to change even today.

### **The Historic Southern American Belle**

#### **The Southern Belle & Race**

Establishing a strong understanding of the region and society from where the belle originated, and thus the “southern” descriptor before the term “belle,” is imperative in order to better understand the specific qualifications a woman must have had in order to fulfill the historic belle ideal. Without an understanding of the society and the gender roles which created the belle to be a woman of a very specific race, education, age, and class, one would not be able to fully understand the shift in the term’s definition from its inception to its current meaning. For the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition matches many of the qualities of the historic southern

belle, while leaving out the momentous detail of her race. This omission holds great significance because the southern belle, historically, must have been white as expressed by books from that time period as well as observations of the racial conditions of the Old South. Caroline Kirkland's manners book describes a "modern belle" of the antebellum era as having a "complexion [...] like blanc-mange, and her form like an hour-glass" (Kirkland 25). This alone suggests that the accepted image of the southern belle remained strictly confined to the white race. The term "blanc-mange" literally translated means "white food" and refers to a dish known for its white appearance and shiny, smooth texture ("Blancmange"). Mrs. Kirkland's comparison of the southern belle to blanc-mange exaggerates that the only acceptable color for a "lady" at that time period was white. In a similar way, many of the southern belle's roles were centered around her race, specifically in a society which valued whiteness above all else. Solely a white woman of means and rank would have the ability to marry a man with slaves and possess the power to manage a household and perform the domestic duties associated with running a plantation (Clinton 18-19). Without slavery, and the society which it supported, the southern belle would not exist. Her very being as a young, *wealthy*, woman of rank centered around this practice since slavery fueled the economy from which her wealth and status sprang. In essence, white skin was the basis and most essential part of a belle's being in the Old South. Yet another author of a women's self-education manual from the 1850s, Catharine Sedgwick, adds to the image of the white southern belle by stating that truth is a virtue and that "lying is the vice of slaves" (Sedgwick 189). Catharine Sedgwick, therefore, suggests that only slaves lie, and through this statement, Sedgwick appears to privilege her readers' race over the race of slaves. Since her perceived audience encompasses her "fellow country-women," she makes a claim that disqualifies African Americans from being a belle (Sedgwick 3). Historically, the term emerged

in tandem with a slave society where slaves could not act in ways that fit the adjectives as outlined in the *OED*'s definition. For slaves were not considered contributing members of society, they were property. In fact, the racial hierarchies of the South not only suggest that southern belles must have been white, but demand, that a belle must have been white since slavery supported and created the belle's identity.

### **The Southern Belle & Class**

By definition, the southern belle was an elite member of society. Kathryn Lee Seidel, an expert on southern belles in literature, states that the belle's family was "the Upper-class southern landowners [who] believed themselves to be descendants of English aristocracy, particularly the cavaliers of the seventeenth century" (Seidel 5). This suggests that the belle was not just born into a wealthy family, but a family who also inherently believed they were descendants of a distinguished and proven lineage. In her memoir, Mary Boykin Chesnut, a prescribed "southern belle" of the Antebellum era, exemplifies this identity by describing her high-class status as the daughter of a "South Carolina nullifier- Governor of the state..." (Chesnut par. 3). As the title of this compilation of diary entries, *Diary of a Southern Belle*, suggests, Mrs. Chesnut's label as a southern belle coincides with her elite status and her family's social position. If Mrs. Chesnut's father was not of the wealthy and elite, as indicated by his government position, then she would have not qualified as a southern belle to begin with. For a southern belle was born into a position of prominence from one of the aristocratic families who owned a large plantation (Seidel 3). Her class was a fixed aspect of her life. Other women who were not born into the elite of society generally stayed within their own lower classes. Those who did rise above their original station, however, were still considered less than because they lacked the lineage associated with the "old" money of the South. On the other hand, poor women



rarely married into wealthy families - they had to be born into it in order to be considered a belle (Seidel 3). Because of the belle's elite status, she acquired special privileges which other women would and could never attain, such as an education and a financially suitable marriage. Without her prominent position, the southern belle would have no power as a woman in the mid-1800s. For many of these young women, their life would follow a distinct path just as their mothers and grandmothers had followed before them. Arguably, the southern belle still held little power as outlined by her strict gender roles, yet she enjoyed certain privileges afforded to her race and status. Not until the Civil War ended would the belle's social class begin to become less of an attribute to her character as the person of the belle disappeared with the lifestyle of the Old South and was instead resurrected as a concept to romanticize that failed society.

### **The Southern Belle & Education**

A southern belle's education set her apart from lower-class women in the mid-1800s, while also empowering the belle in the midst of a hierarchical society so attuned to the superiority of the white man. According to historian Christie Anne Farnham, a woman's power rested in her education, and without money and social status, a woman could not receive that proper education (3). Although a strong emphasis was placed on education in the Antebellum South, the aim of the belle's education was simply two-fold: to catch a husband and to network friendships with those of the same sex. On the one hand, education would fine-tune skills the belle would need in order to exert power over men and give her the ability to choose the best mate while securing her future happiness (Farnham 3). On the other hand, education gave these single young women the ability to develop and strengthen a unique identity for themselves amongst other females. In order to create these special bonds with other women, belles "developed the first college sororities and participated in the cultural practice known as romantic

friendships” (Farnham 4). These friendships broadened the belle’s network beyond the confines of her daddy’s (or future husband’s) plantation and provided her with a period of female camaraderie perhaps missing from her life up until this point and after she left school.

Consequently, because of the social structures to which these women conformed in their own domestic spaces, women’s colleges and educational institutions began to reflect these very hierarchies as well (Farnham 4). Although the purpose of a southern belle’s education was to instill a prescribed class system through institutional gentility, women’s higher education in the Antebellum South began to reflect curricula drawn from some of the best men’s colleges of the day (Farnham 3). Courses such as Latin, Greek, mathematics, classics, and more, began to round out the belle’s education and expand her perspective beyond high fashion and good manners (Farnham 20). Interestingly enough, however, “the antebellum South was an innovator in collegiate education for women, which was explicitly designed to be the equivalent of men’s colleges” (Farnham 7). Though these courses appear to equalize educational opportunities for females of this time in comparison to their male counterparts, this extensive education simply strengthened the disparities between the southern belle and women of baser means, thus reinforcing other social hierarchies existing contemporaneously.

The shift in emphasis from providing only strong male educational institutions in the United States to creating both strong male and female institutions, became visible in both the North and the South during the Antebellum era. Catharine Sedgwick, a northern women’s education advocate and prominent American novelist of the early 1800s, highlights the importance of a strong woman’s education at this time by stating that “the condition in our country calls for more enlarged power in our women... I ask you then my young friends to be deserving of the respect of the other sex, and you will surely receive it; to qualify yourselves for

more various employments and you will certainly obtain them” (Sedgwick 16). In this way, Sedgwick encourages her fellow country-women to seek education so that greater and more varied opportunities may be opened to them. Sedgwick later clarifies what these exact “opportunities” are when she implores women to “be so educated that you can have an independent pursuit, something to occupy your time and affections; then marriage will not be essential to your usefulness, respectability, or happiness (19).

Sedgwick’s admonition marks a stark contrast between the impetuses for female educational reform in the North and in the South; the North desired to make their young women independent, while the South wanted their southern belles to be so refined that the barriers between class remained ever fixed, both subordinating women under patriarchal rule and other races under the rule of white supremacy. For although an education could potentially give these women a greater amount of independence if they desired to live on their own (instead of marrying), the standard of marriage as a woman’s ultimate aim in *southern* plantation society created tension and social disgrace for those who chose not to follow its rules. For once a belle surpassed marrying-age, her life would condemn her to “the worst” possibility – being an old maid (Farnham 181). Because spinsters were so frowned upon in southern society, southern belles’ educational aspirations continued to center on the hope of an impending marriage, even when their education could have prepared them for something more.

The contrast between the educational reasoning of the North and the South is laid bare once more as Southern female institutions incorporated classes on manners, morals, and the liberal arts, while Northern female institutions incorporated more vocational training into their curriculum (Farnham 24). This did not keep young southern women from attending some northern educational institutions, however, and Northern women from moving South to teach or



be educated. For this allowed intersectional friendships to develop and networks to span across regional differences (Farnham 97). Not until southern belles disappeared along with the southern cultural framework which supported them, would both types of female education begin to merge and women from both regions would begin to receive the same type of education. The emphasis placed on the southern belle's education and the South's role in women's educational reform as a whole, creates an interesting paradox which not only shaped the belle's life, but which may also leave a lasting impression on the concept of the belle that is generally thought of today.

### **The Southern Belle & Courtship**

By definition, the historical southern belle was young, unmarried, and expected to fulfill specific gender roles as outlined by southern society and culture. Her future marriage and social status, although not yet an attribute of her character as a belle, was anticipated by her friends and family as a necessary next-step in her life. The southern belle then appears at the age of adolescence when a young woman comes out into society with a certain amount of beauty and charm only attributed to her status as a young, single woman (Roberts 193). At this specific point in her life, the belle existed in a realm of blissful role-reversal: men were at her mercy in terms of marriage proposals, and the belle, for once in her life, had the power to choose. Marriage was the sole goal for the belle, but her so called "independence" stemmed from her ability to "construct an image of the sought-after woman who left a trail of broken hearts..." (Roberts 207; Farnham 4). This very state of independence before marriage, and the belle's ability to make men throw themselves on her mercy for their own social success, handed the belle a gift where she no longer felt subordinate, but instead, could toy with the men in her life and potentially leave their hearts broken if desired. This taste of "independence," although still not fully without constraints, occurred only once in the belle's life since "daughters were subject to their fathers' will, and a

married female was by law wholly under her husband's control" (Clinton 4). Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind* represents a perfect example of an independent single woman exerting her power over men, when she decides that she will "flirt with every man there. That would be cruel to Ashley, but it would make him yearn for her all the more" (Mitchell 100). The author of *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell, highlights this short-lived independence by depicting Scarlett as a strong woman exerting her power as a belle, even though her purpose lies in trying to make a suitor jealous and ultimately, ensnare him into marriage as a result. Scarlett's declaration to use her leverage as a single woman, the ability she possessed to make men jealous and undermine their own societal power, clearly summarizes the power the belle possessed at this point in her life. The description of a southern belle's freedom before marriage, yet her dependency on marriage for the purpose of her existence, creates a type of paradox concerning her character.

### **The Southern Belle & Matrimony**

Because of the definition necessitating a southern belles' unmarried status, married southern ladies would not have been considered a belle – for they forfeited that title once they were no longer single women who were not yet tied to husbands <sup>4</sup>. For women of married status were required to give up much of their independence, indicative of the belle, once they submitted to the authority of a husband (Jabour 2). Although belles are defined as unmarried young women, every aspect of their lives shaped them into women who would fulfill a very specific role in Southern society once they did take their marriage vows. Most women of the Antebellum South were expected to marry, keep house, raise children, and fulfill numerous domestic duties

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<sup>4</sup> Many nineteenth century authors use terms to describe southern ladies which sometimes appear interchangeable, although a distinct difference exists between a southern "lady" and a southern "belle" (Farnham 2). Belles were solely young and unmarried, while southern ladies could include both young, old, single, and married.



(Seidel 6). Although this expectation of women was not confined solely to the southern region of the United States, the belle's specific aim in life rested in matrimony. This is expressed in *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular American women's magazine of the 1800s, and which circulated substantially in the South, when an article states that "The profession of ladies, to which the bent of their instruction should be turned, is that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families" (*Godey's Lady's Book*). Thus, the belle's goal of marriage and the societal expectations placed on her as a future wife and mother not only reinforced gender roles of the South, but also of the Antebellum period in the United States.

### **The Southern Belle Metamorphosis**

#### **From Southern Belle to She-Rebel**

As the historical position of the southern belle collapsed with the end of the Civil War, the concept of the belle evolved to remember traditional values indicative of the Old South while also adopting novel behavioral and moral characteristics of women living in the New South. This transformation occurs through what Anya Jabour, a notable historian and scholar in gender studies, describes as the "she-rebel" (1). She-rebels were "young women in the Civil War era [who] often were forced to choose between their identity as ladies and their identity as rebels" (Jabour 2). This paradox captured young women of the time between their desire to help the Confederacy and their desire to uphold the societal expectations of that same society in order to remain lady-like in manners and morality. The war became the linchpin which tore the societal expectations of the belle in two: to remain a lady in the traditional sense, she had to defend the society who bound her in these behavioral obligations, yet in order to defend Southern society, she had to break her "lady-like" habits to support the cause. One particularly dramatic example of a she-rebel wrote in her personal correspondence that "I believe I would kill a Yankee and not

a muscle quiver. Oh! The intensity with which I hate them” (Ellen House qtd. in Jabour 1) Not only would a southern belle traditionally be chastised for the use of such language, but she would also be barred from polite society if ever her thoughts of hatred and murder were expressed. Yet another example of a she-rebel, Miss Eliza Andrews, declared in her diary that “If all the words of hatred in every language under heaven were lumped together into one huge epithet of detestation, they could not tell how I hate Yankees” (Andrews 67). The belle’s “patriotism” as expressed through her declaration of hatred for a Yankee, is only acceptable at this time because of her support for the Old South and its way of life.

As established by the historical contexts of the southern belle, a belle could flirt and use her charming powers to help her find the best husband, but she was never allowed to overtly ignore the rules of social engagements like the she-rebel did. This lack of distinction that has grown between southern belles and southern she-rebels suggests a reason behind the qualifier in the *OED*’s definition of the southern belle as having a “wild, flirtatious, or *steely* character” (*OED Online*). Authors writing about the “southern belle” both after the Civil War and up until the present, further transformed the definition and concept of the southern belle as they adopted characteristics indicative of the she-rebel. With the production of various film and textual representations of “southern belles,” the transformation of this concept from the traditional belle to she-rebel further explains where parts of our current definition find its origin. This becomes especially evident through Margaret Mitchell’s character of Scarlett O’Hara.

While it is true that Scarlett behaves as a traditional belle before the war, her behavior shifts drastically both during and after the war as her motivations change from finding a suitable husband to survival. In fact, she acts like a she-rebel through her blatant disregard for acceptable lady-like behavior. On more than one occasion, Scarlett acts in a way not befitting a southern

belle - such instances include dancing while she should have been in mourning for her deceased husband and committing a heinous act of violence when she kills a northern soldier (Mitchell 195, 419). Because of the characteristics now attributed to the southern belle through the she-rebel concept, the definition of the southern belle continued to change based on what historian Giselle Roberts calls the “myth of the belle” (Roberts 190). Roberts states that many belles during the war did not live extravagantly as southern aristocracy as suggested by characters in *Gone with the Wind*. Instead, people attribute the mythic qualities of luxury to the southern belle because of the character of Scarlett O’Hara. She explains that “the myth of the belle has become synonymous with the fictional character of Scarlett O’Hara,” and further argues that modern thought continues to express this myth because of its prevalence in popular culture (Roberts 190). The character of Scarlett O’Hara then embodies the transformation of the concept of the southern belle as the timeline of *Gone With the Wind* outlines the southern belle before the war, the destruction of the Old South and the southern belle as a member of it, and the emergence of the she-rebel in the wake of the Civil War.

### **War, Reconstruction, and Southern Womanhood**

The historical southern belle’s characteristics as defined by her race, class, education, and status as an unmarried woman of courtship age, all contribute to the lasting concept of the belle that is thought of today. Yet many different ideas currently exist concerning the *concept* of the southern belle because of how drastically southern women’s roles in society, their behavioral expectations, and their defining characteristics changed both during and after the end of the Civil War. As men left their families and homes to fight on the frontlines of battle, the women were required to step up into the men’s places and take on different roles which were normally fulfilled solely by men (Roberts 199). This required the belle to become more independent and



gave these young women greater freedom to choose their direction in life away from the traditional course of marriage, motherhood, and housework. Thus, not only did the belle's duties change, but also her purpose in life. Since men were scarce, courtship and marriage became a distant hope for many of these young women. The focus of the southern belle's life shifted from courtship and domestic duties to working to support herself as her original aim of marriage turned into a dream, which many young girls could have scarcely imagined in reality (Roberts 207). With so many young men being killed in the war, belles were not only concerned about finding the *right* husband, but a husband at all. Instead, the belle became most concerned about living the life of a spinster as single living was "hardly the crowning achievement of a successful belle-hood" after such women surpassed courting age. Similarly, women's education, which was traditionally directed to cultivating the charm and elegance needed to catch a husband, was instead transferred to a vocational education, such as teaching, so as to provide for herself in case her traditional role of a "belle" never resulted in marriage (Roberts 210). Consequently, the belle's social status which "rested on the bent backs of slaved African Americans" changed as well with the abolition of slavery (Jabour 2; Roberts 198). No longer was the belle the "plantation mistress" in training, but instead a woman who was released from the prescribed roles of a white, wealthy, elite woman, and became a concept which would transform the definition of southern womanhood. Although the belle's character showed immediate changes in class, education, and gender roles, her race stayed inherently white even after the emancipation of the slaves. Such a dramatic change in the definition of the "southern belle" would not be realized until after many years. With the death of the Old South, the southern belle as a specific type of person died as well since the definition of the belle no longer accurately represented the experiences and characteristics of young women living in the South. For the southern belle's

person was not only associated with the Old South and the institution of slavery, but also depended on that very institution to support her marriage, lifestyle, and identity as a southern woman. When the economy and social order crashed with the abolition of slavery, the belle, as defined and supported by that southern institution came tumbling down as well. Instead, the southern belle evolved into a concept, an idea, of what southern women and life looked like before the Civil War.

With the introduction of the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War as well as the period of Reconstruction after the war, the social, political, and economic constructs of the South changed. Since memories of the Old South included the southern belle as a person, the southern belle was resurrected as a *concept* through the very writings indicative of the Lost Cause. But by the 1870s, most southerners considered Reconstruction to be a suffocating and unnecessary imposition on their way of life (Blight 106). To counteract the effects of this supposed “suppression,” many writers began to romanticize the Old South and the ways in which the South used to function. Seth Weitz quotes Gaines Foster’s definition of the “the Lost Cause” as “the postwar writings and activities that perpetuated the memory of the Confederacy” (Foster qtd. in Weitz 80). This becomes especially apparent in works of the early twentieth century such as in Margaret Mitchell’s novel, *Gone with the Wind*. Mitchell’s character Scarlett creates a feeling of nostalgia when she thinks back to her childhood at Tara, her family’s plantation. She wistfully wonders how “she could be so young, so as not to understand...that the land was the one thing worth fighting for” (Mitchell 603). This indicates Scarlett’s reminiscence of days gone by while also painting the Old South as a victim of the war- not the other way around. Instead of pointing out the atrocities of slavery that the South held dear, Mitchell writes as if the *land* of the South were the cause of the war and not their enslavement of people who worked that land.

Scarlett becomes a figure who embodies and commemorates many of the southern belle's qualities, albeit through a nostalgic, racist haze. Since the Lost Cause portrayed the Old South in a favorable light, these writings encouraged reconciliation narratives which could take readers back to a time of peace and ease before the turmoil of the war and unite the North and South in harmony once again (Blight 211). As writers began to write reminiscent narratives about the Old South (c.1880s-90s), the southern belle reemerged as a concept depicting southern life before the war, while also acquiring novel and distinct characteristics as the New South emerged (Blight 216).

### **The Southern Belle in Text and Film**

Because the concept of the southern belle acquired characteristics indicative of the she-rebel after the war, it began to evolve even more as the concept took on whatever personalities the authors of books and the directors of films wished it to possess. Although initially this transformation occurred through the Lost Cause ideology, the Lost Cause was not without its "discontents" and therefore, the range of personalities that the belle concept acquired became quite vast (Blight 211). On the one hand, some depictions of the southern belle represented traditional and ladylike southern values in an effort to romanticize the Old South, while others, in an effort to criticize that failed slave society, depicted the belles as immoral and lacking in virtue. As an expert on women in literature, Professor Kathryn Lee Seidel insightfully argues that "The belle's personality traits and the plot or life story an author invents are roughly reflective of the author's attitude toward the South itself" (xiii). Thus, the concept of the southern belle in popular culture began to embody one of two types of women: either the virtuous and pure young woman of the Old South, or the fallen and morally bereft woman of the post-war South (Seidel xiii). As authors and directors continued to experiment with the concept of the southern belle, some of



their most popular works have drastically impacted people's perceptions of the belle and continue to shape some of our perceptions even today.

Since every novel or script carries undertones indicative of the time in which the author lived and wrote, the idea of the southern belle continued to evolve as American history unfolded. In John Pendleton Kennedy's novel, *Swallow Barn* (1832), Bel Tracy, the southern belle character, is described as wealthy, naïve, and passionate. According to historian Kathryn Lee Seidel, the only "flaw" Bel possesses is how she tends to romanticize events in her life (4). The characterization of Bel suggests that the general attitude towards the South at this time was amiable, if not romanticized. Fast forward one hundred years to American film director David Butler's motion picture, *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), which also demonstrates this concept by portraying Shirley Temple as a she-rebel; yet instead of portraying this she-rebel as a figure bent on keeping a race enslaved, she is praised for her efforts in trying to save her father from death as a Confederate spy captured by the Union army (Butler). The director's choice of Shirley Temple, "America's Little Darling," for this role evokes an image of purity and sweetness, and thus places this film in line with the Lost Cause tradition. This then suggests that the social climate of the 1930s must have remained sentimental, in part, towards the South in order to be well-received by the general public. Almost contemporaneously, the other half of the audience began to fault this depiction and supported texts and films such as Tennessee William's *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947). William's depiction turned the southern belle concept on its head by depicting the southern belle as faded, immoral, and neurotic, thus suggesting the critical stance of his audience towards the South when this book, and later film adaption, were produced (Langman 35). Even though the belle did originally exist as an entity in the Antebellum

American South, it has now transformed into an abstract idea and concept in the minds of most Americans.

### **The Scarlett O'Hara Effect**

As demonstrated in the previous section, various texts and films have greatly impacted the perception of the southern belle, but arguably none as great as the character of Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret Mitchell's most famous novel, *Gone with the Wind*. According to experts on the southern belle, Scarlett has become synonymous with the concept of the belle because of the Old South context in which the novel takes place; Scarlett looks the part of the belle, lives the part, and even acts the part on some occasions, yet Scarlett is not a southern belle. Instead, Scarlett embodies the southern belle transformation as she both disregards traditional southern belle protocol and is forced to leave behind her old way of life due to the war. As demonstrated through Scarlett's flippant disregard for societal constructs, Scarlett "found the role of Southern lady somewhat restrictive and laid the groundwork for another version of Southern femininity" (Reed 100-101). Scarlett can then be viewed not as the perfect southern belle, but as a proto-feminist character.

With southern society being pressed to accept equality for all, women's rights became another aspect of that fight. In this context, Scarlett becomes a symbol of survival, strength, and resistance, and it is partly because of this characterization, that the concept of the belle has come to be taken up by various women, and at times, regardless of race (Bates). Karen Bates, an African American correspondent for NPR News, speaks to why she, in some respects, wants to identify with Scarlett. She states that "some aspects of Scarlett transcend race" and goes on to compare a strong African American woman she knows to Scarlett by saying that "they both stepped forward and said 'No — I'm not going to do what you want me to do, because I'm free.'



And I think that's the thing we like about Scarlett O' Hara, is she was always determined to be free" (Bates). Although this perspective does not speak for all women, nor does it completely capture African Americans' experiences, it does suggest one way in which the concept of the southern belle has come to be taken up as an identity by more than just white, wealthy, southern women today.

Furthermore, cultural artifacts such as texts and blogs reinforce this notion that the southern belle identity has begun to transcend its deeply racist characteristics to become a symbol for southern femininity. For example, a lifestyle blog now exists which is called "The Black Southern Belle" ("Homepage"). This blog incorporates articles concerning activities specific to southern culture and womanhood, which African Americans both identify with and enjoy. Thus, the southern belle identity had to change drastically from its original historical contexts in order for African American women to take up this identity, especially considering its racist origin. Similarly, Maryln Schwartz's book *A Southern Belle Primer* (1991) suggests that some African American women identify with the southern belle concept by including a picture of an African American debutante in her text as one example of a modern southern belle (52). While neither of these artifacts specifically address Scarlett O'Hara as the reason for why African American many women desire to identify with the southern belle identity, the character of Scarlett offers an explanation for how or why African American women may desire to identify in this way. Perhaps some choose to view Scarlett as more of a model of valiant character and feminist progressiveness, while consciously deciding to forget her racist character in the process.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Research Design and Context**

#### **Introduction**

This study was designed to utilize qualitative research methods so as to best represent the complexity of current perceptions of the southern belle within a specific community of Southerners. Furthermore, this study aims to contextualize the knowledge of current perceptions of the southern belle by contrasting them with the history of the belle and the change in the concept of the belle over the years. This includes the adoption of the southern belle identity by women of various backgrounds, socioeconomic brackets, and races. Using a socio-linguistic approach, two group interviews were conducted where participants were asked questions in order to check for their perspectives of the southern belle and to suggest possible reasons for why those perceptions are held by people today. These interviews were conducted in South Carolina, as a representative state of the American “South,” and also in order to provide a deeper scope of knowledge on the topic without surpassing the researcher’s limited reach. In order to allow for as much freedom of expression, ideas, and perceptions as possible, the researcher prepared questions to direct and facilitate the conversation, but which also allowed the responses to flow organically from the participants. This empowered participants to build their responses off each other, and thus lend the conversation to various forms of discourse analysis, while also encouraging and allowing participants to build upon their own personal experiences and ideals.

Drawing on participants with variance in regard to socio-economic status, place of birth, gender, and marital status allowed the researcher to view the concept of the southern belle through multiple perspectives and to develop a narrative concerning the southern belle’s metamorphosis. Although the participants for this study did not differ in terms of education and

race, the results of this study suggest one possible modern perception of the southern belle, specifically in the region of Columbia, SC.

Each interview was recorded by the researcher and stored on a locked computer. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using evaluative discourse analysis techniques. Words were organized in regard to their positive, negative, or neutral connotations. Once words of interest were selected from the transcribed interviews, the researcher looked for patterns in the perceptions of the southern belle concept by participants. Lastly, each of the participants' responses were placed into conversation with one another to develop an argument for how the modern southern belle is viewed by a sub-population of college students in Columbia, SC.

### **Positionality**

Growing up in the southern United States as a young, white, middle class woman in the state of South Carolina, the researcher recognizes that her specific perception of the southern belle and the greater narrative surrounding the southern belle ideal may shape the results of this study through her interactions with the participants and her interpretation of the data. Recognizing that the researcher has influence over the interview, a second reader reviewed the questions scripted to begin the conversation and to ensure that each question was worded objectively in order to receive answers from participants without undue influence from the researcher. The researcher then used these questions to begin the conversation between interviewees, and once the conversation began, the researcher allowed the participants to discuss the questions, while asking qualifying questions to further the discourse as necessary. Through the group interview format, the answers of participants collaboratively built upon one another and provided a discourse between the interviewer and the participants which informed the results of this study. The position of the researcher as a middle-class, southern, white woman,



undoubtedly brings a certain understanding to the observations and conversations documented in this paper, but ultimately were either reinforced or refuted based on current literature and other's understandings of the southern belle. Thus, any and all conclusions and findings from this study may be prone to specific interpretations based on the researcher's background, but which still offer insight and one *type* of perception of the southern belle ideal based on the participants' influence on each other, the interviewer's influence on the participants, and possible outside factors contributing to participants' perceptions of the southern belle. A list of interview questions may be found in the appendix.

Similarly, the purview of this research project was limited by the researcher's scope of participants, and which ultimately limited the results of this study. In order to use discourse analysis techniques to analyze the data pulled from the interviews, the researcher had to transcribe each 45-minute interview and evaluate that data by attributing words of interest with evaluative designations and then organizing them into categories such as words with positive, negative, and neutral connotations. With limitations on the researcher's time and resources, this specific study does not attempt to suggest a general perception of the southern belle by those in the American South, but to offer *a* perception of the southern belle as found in a representative southern city, in a sub-population of students at the public state university. In this way, this study suggests one possible perception of the modern southern belle, while setting up a framework for a much larger study which could potentially offer more than one perception of the southern belle and perhaps a more general definition of the modern southern belle at large. Participants for this study were drawn from the public state university and were asked to signify their current perceptions of the southern belle. Due to the nature of the group interview research method, 2 groups of 3 participants were recruited who had ties with each other outside of the interview and

who felt comfortable conversing and speaking openly in front of the other interviewees. This non-random sampling method gave the participants more freedom to speak honestly and openly with others in the group and with the researcher during the interview. As a result, the researcher received better and clearer results of the participants' perceptions of the southern belle.

Given that the range of participants in this study identified as both men and women as well as southern and non-southern, the data represents how those who do and do not identify with the concept of the southern belle understand it. Initially the researcher desired to incorporate perceptions of both those with a white background and those of other ethnic and racial backgrounds as part of the group interview, but no one of variant ethnic backgrounds volunteered to participate. Volunteering was imperative for the research methodology of this study since participants needed to be comfortable in the interview setting in order for the researcher to receive the opinions of the interviewees in an uncoerced and truthful manner. The participants for this study represent, to the best of the researcher's ability, a sample of people currently living in the South, attending a university with a southern heritage, and, who due to the nature of their current work as a student, are continually learning new information from people of various backgrounds, while also processing that information in light of their own personal experiences. In this way, university students proved an especially viable group of people from whom to draw participants. Because of the participants' personal backgrounds, their views of the southern belle may be influenced by their privilege of being at a university, as well as their own race, class, or place of birth. Therefore, the scope of the researcher's understanding of the perceptions of the southern belle and the adoption of this ideal by others, is limited by the reach of the participants involved and the contacts of the researcher.



**Participant Demographic Overview:****Group Interview 1**

Identification in Paper	Pseudonym	Marital Status	Age	Gender
Participant 1	Margaret	Single	22	Female
Participant 2	Elizabeth	Single	22	Female
Participant 3	Bob	Single	22	Male

Race	SES	Place of Birth	Lives/Has Lived in the South	Which States?
<b>White</b>	\$75000 and above	Reston, VA	Yes	VA, SC, NC
<b>White</b>	\$75000 and above	Richmond, VA	Yes	VA, SC
<b>White</b>	\$75000 and above	Columbia, SC	Yes	SC

**Group Interview 2**

Identification in Paper	Pseudonym	Marital Status	Age	Gender
Participant 4	Ellison	Married	21	Female
Participant 5	Grace	Single	20	Female

Participant 6	Nicole	Single	20	Female
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Race	SES	Place of Birth	Lives/Has Lived in the South	Which States?
White	Less than \$15000	Hartsville, SC	Yes	SC
White	\$15000-\$34999	Spartanburg, SC	Yes	SC
White	\$75000 and above	Columbia, SC	Yes	SC

### Group Interview Participants

Each participant voluntarily filled out an optional demographic form where they documented their marital status, age, gender, race, socio-economic status, place of birth, and any southern states in which they lived. Participants for this study comprised students from the University of South Carolina between the ages of 20 and 22. Participant 1, Margaret, is a single, white female initially born in Virginia, but who has lived in North Carolina and South Carolina. She and her family currently qualify for the highest socio-economic bracket. Participant 2, Elizabeth, is also a single, white female born in northern Virginia, and who does not identify as a southerner despite being born in a traditionally “southern” state. She and her family also meet the threshold for the highest socio-economic bracket. Participant 3, Bob, is a single, white male born and raised in South Carolina whose family qualifies for the highest socio-economic bracket. Participants Margaret and Bob knew each other extensively outside of the interview and all three

participants knew the interviewer outside of the interview platform. Margaret, Elizabeth, and Bob comprised the first group interview.

Participant 4, Ellison, is a married, white woman who has lived in South Carolina her whole life and currently meets the threshold for the lowest socioeconomic bracket. Participant 5, Grace, is a single, white female also born and raised in South Carolina, but who meets the threshold for the second to lowest socio-economic bracket. Participant 6, Nicole, is a single, white female whose family qualifies for the highest socio-economic bracket. Grace and Nicole knew each other outside of the interview and all participants (Ellison, Grace, and Nicole) knew the interviewer outside of the group interview. Ellison, Grace, and Nicole comprised the second group interview.



### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Discussion and Findings**

##### **Dual Definitions of the Term “Southern Belle”**

Throughout both group interviews, participants referred to the term “southern belle” in both traditional and modern senses. As chapter 1 of this thesis showed, the southern belle had been established as a historical figure and then later as a concept or idea through which southern womanhood could be described, while the participants in this study began to refer to the belle *as a person* in both the past and the present. On the one hand, a southern belle was described as a type of woman from the past, such as when Bob stated that a southern belle evoked an “old-timey picture” of a woman from the “old South” in his mind. Later in the interview, however, participants began describing examples of friends whom they, at one point or other, described as southern belles. Margaret referred to a woman in her church whom she considers to be a southern belle, while Elizabeth, Grace, and Nicole all used the term southern belle to describe friends or acquaintances they knew as members of some current on-campus sororities. The ability to use this term as figures in the past and present suggests that the southern belle, a term which at one point was solely used to describe a young woman who lived, died, and belonged within a specific historical context, has now become a phrase that not only defines a concept, but also women in this current day and age.

In relation to the historic definition of the southern belle, the four defining characteristics of that type of southern woman, namely her race, class, education, and availability for marriage, are quite different from people’s perceptions of the southern belle today. Although none of the participants in this group differed in their race from the historic belle’s white race, participants from both interviews expressed that southern belles could and should be a woman of any race.

Specifically, Margaret expressed this fact when she said, “I think historically it has been applied in my opinion to like the white race, but I definitely think...” and Elizabeth finished the statement with “I think it is applicable to any race.” Both participants agreed with this statement but did not give any examples of someone of a different race being a southern belle. Similarly, participants in the second interview also expressed that southern belles could be from a race other than white. Nicole specifically stated that she knew of some girls through a friend of hers that she would consider southern belles and who were not white. She stated that there “are certainly girls who are not, like Caucasian-... That I feel like, look the part -... Acted the part.... But I think there is.” Although each of the participants’ responses presuppose that the term southern belle used to only be used to identify white women, the fact that each participant believed the term could be used to identify women of other races suggest a shift in the perception of the southern belle in comparison to its historical definition.

Interestingly enough, participants were split in their opinions of a current belle’s socioeconomic status. Many participants believed that a belle was elite, upper-class, and wealthy. Ellison, however, believed that a belle could come from any socio-economic bracket as long as she “acted” like a belle. Concerning a modern belle’s education, participants were again split as to whether or not a belle needed to have schooling beyond high school. Contrary to other participants, Nicole believed that not all belles needed to attain higher education as long as they still acted and behaved in a polished way. Finally, participants were again split as to the marital status of a modern southern belle. Instead of being strictly of courtship age, Margaret referred to an example of a belle at her church who was “married with kids.” Yet in the second group interview, participants originally thought the belle to be married, but then changed their decision after further discussion to define a modern southern belle as one who “will be married” and is

“desired.” By comparing the differences between just these four aspects of the historic and the now prescribed “modern” belle, generalizations can be drawn concerning who we may refer to as a southern belle today and also give insight into how we apply this term in contemporary discourse.

Based on current literature on southern belles, many scholars have explored the person of the historic southern belle but have yet to discuss the possibility of a “modern” southern belle existing in the present. The multiple ways in which this term is used, as illustrated by the differing opinions in the group interview, explains why some current perceptions of the belle encompass a historic figure, an attitude or concept about southern womanhood, and an actual, specific type of modern southern women all in one. Because of the interchangeability of this term and the conflicting perceptions of who or what constitutes a southern belle and the southern belle ideal, it follows that the reason for this usage variance lies in having multiple definitions of a southern belle at play in modern southern culture. Although the historic person of the southern belle does not exist anymore, the *definition* associated with the historic southern belle remains in use and influences current perceptions. With both the historic definition and the modern definition still at work in southern vernacular, the variability in the usage of this term allows the definition of the southern belle to continually evolve as it is used to describe southern women and culture.

### **Southern Social Types and the Language We Use**

In sociolinguistics, the term *social type* refers to a general characterization of a group or people much in the same way a stereotype, as defined as “a fixed, over-generalized belief about a particular group or class of people,” in the linguistic sense, delineates a general perception about



an experience or identity<sup>5</sup> (Cardwell). Based on the definition provided in the *OED*, the southern belle concept appears to qualify as a social type in some respects, while also retaining certain characteristics of the historic southern belle that would suggest otherwise. Certainly, throughout the group interviews that were conducted, the participants reinforced many of the descriptions of the *OED* (unbeknownst to participants), especially in the areas of physical beauty, class, and region of origin. Elizabeth and Nicole stated that a southern belle is “very pretty.” Elizabeth and Grace described the belle as someone coming from a “wealthy family.” All participants in both interviews agreed that the southern belle had to come from the South, or the southeastern region of the United States, specifically in what they described as the “Deep South.” “the upper part of Florida. South Carolina. Lower North Carolina. Georgia. Mississippi. Alabama- and parts of Tennessee.” Thus, the *OED* accurately captures a general perception of the American Southern belle as recorded in primary sources and documents; yet because the *OED* employs a very specific process for defining its terms that is rooted in written discourse, its definition does not change as quickly as oral usage might. Through participants’ responses in the group interviews, this study offers nuance to the perception of the belle by documenting characterizations of the southern belle not necessarily captured by its social type.

Not all perceptions of the southern belle neatly fall into the southern belle social type as expressed by the *OED*. Instead, when participants discussed how they viewed a southern belle, they each qualified the *OED*’s definition in some way in order to describe their own perception of the belle. Margaret views the modern southern belle as “outgoing and personable,” not hidden underneath an “outwardly demure appearance” as noted by the (*OED Online*). Elizabeth described the modern southern belle as someone who frequently goes to church and is not

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<sup>5</sup> Although some may associate the term *stereotype* with a negative connotation, this study uses the term in a neutral sense to describe a general belief or perception unless otherwise noted.

described as “wild” (*OED Online*). Bob expresses that he generally never uses the term “southern belle” to describe someone at all in the present, since that term only seems to be accurately describing a woman from the Old South in his mind. This description, specifically, is completely opposite of the *OED*’s, since its definition is situated in the present. Similarly, Ellison believe that southern belles may come from all socioeconomic classes as long as they fulfill other characteristics of the southern belle social type. Furthermore, Grace bases her entire definition of a southern belle around the fact that a belle is “looking for a guy.” In this example, the *OED* does not address the aspect of a belle’s marital status or lack thereof. Lastly, Nicole qualified who could be a modern southern belle by stating that the term has a “younger connotation” and applies to a “young person.” Once again, the *OED* is silent on the point of a belle’s age. While the *OED* may offer a general perception of the belle as expressed through texts, modern perceptions of the southern belle have a much greater variance.

As participants discussed their perceptions of southern belles, both groups utilized other southern (and not so southern) social types to help explain why they thought a specific characteristic should be attributed to a southern belle, suggesting that they conceptualize the southern belle as a social type in some instances as well. One of these social types, although referred to as a stereotype by participants, most frequently referred to was the “redneck” stereotype. Every time this stereotype was referenced, participants juxtaposed redneck with the southern belle social type as a means of expressing what a southern belle was not. Although Margaret hesitated to use the term redneck in the interview, knowing that this stereotype carries with it specific negative connotations, she decided to use it anyway as a way of describing a non-example of the southern belle social type. Margaret and Ellison expressed that a southern belle is polished, high-class, educated, and wealthy. This stands in stark contrast to the typical redneck

persona. The *OED* defines a redneck as “any unsophisticated or poorly educated person, *esp.* one holding bigoted or reactionary attitudes” (*OED Online*). In this way, these social types encompass a wide range of qualities through which southern women’s mannerisms, characteristics, and behaviors may be compared.

Because participants decided to use other stereotypes or social types to describe their perceptions of the southern belle, the concept of the belle took on some of the characteristics indicative of each of those social types. Other social types that participants referred to during the interview in order to explain their perceptions of the southern belle included “country girl, southern lady, southern girl, mean girl, and white girl.” Although each of these social types hold their own generalized beliefs and positive and/or negative connotations, they help situate one definition of the southern belle term by shaping its social type perception. For example, Margaret described the social life of a southern belle by comparing her to a “white girl” social type who is always seen with “at least two other white girls.” Similarly, Elizabeth described her perception of a southern belle by comparing her to a stereotypical “mean girl” in this way: “there's the stereotype of oh, the popular mean girl, and that's just how I associate a Southern Belle.” To this participant, the southern belle then embodies characteristics of a snobby, mean, popular girl who is used to getting what she wants, even at the expense of others. Earlier in the interview, Elizabeth had suggested that “daddy’s money,” in part, created modern southern belles and thus came to associate belles with having a charmed, privileged life. As other social types come to be associated or connected with the idea of the southern belle, the term will continue to take on multiple characteristics and evolve to describe various types of southern women.



### **The Power of Context: The Derogatory and Complimentary Nature of “Southern Belle”**

As hinted in the previous section, the social type perception of the southern belle, as well as other social types that people hold concerning groups of people, influences how the term *southern belle* is both used and received today. During the interviews, participants began describing their personal perceptions of a southern belle and emphasizing the importance of context when talking about the concept of the southern belle and when applying that description to someone else. For all participants in both interviews shared that being called a southern belle could be both derogatory and complimentary in nature based on how and when the term is used. As noted above, the dual definitions of the southern belle allow the word to take on a negative or positive connotation based on which definition the term is operating under in a conversation and based on the context in which the term is being implemented. In the first interview, Elizabeth described the southern belle as physically “attractive, pretty, put together, and perfect” when describing the person and physical characteristics of a southern belle, but then further characterized the belle in a negative light by stating that she thinks of a southern belle as someone who “get[s] whatever they want.” In this way, being called a southern belle can be both a compliment and an insult.

Although this study establishes that the term southern belle has two definitions (the historic and social type) at work in modern language, these definitions do not always remain separate and begin to overlap in people’s perceptions of the southern belle. According to chapter 1 of this thesis, the person of the southern belle was so closely tied to the institution of slavery in the South that the historic definition has retained negative connotations even in today’s culture. For instance, Margaret and Elizabeth hinted at the racist origin of the southern belle when they described that “historically it has been applied, in my opinion, to like the white race” and “I think

I generally think of a southern belle, like in a white context- which probably shapes a lot of what I view of a southern belle today.” Because these participants recognized that a southern belle must have been a white female due to the blatant racism prevalent in the Antebellum South, they knew that the social type perception of a belle that they held today was still influenced by that historic definition. Furthermore, Elizabeth inadvertently connected her current perception to the white privilege generally associated with the historic figure of the belle when she stated that a certain actress is famous “because of her dad- she gets whatever she wants.” This statement not only implies that this modern, white “southern belle” is high class, but that she did not become that way on her own merits. Instead, like a southern belle, she was born into her position of wealth and luxury that her family provided. In this way, the historic definition of the southern belle continues to influence how we perceive the concept of the southern belle today.

Context is key when analyzing whether or not the term southern belle is perceived positively or negatively in contemporary discourse. This point became especially apparent when one participant in a group interview gave two separate examples, one positive and one negative, where acquaintances used the term “southern belle” when engaging in conversation with her. In the first example, Grace described when someone responded to her statement that she wanted to work in D.C. after graduation by saying, “Oh, you're gonna have a hard time not intimidating some guy to marry you. Don't you just hope to be a southern belle?” When used in this way, she described the term southern belle as being derogatory in nature because it assumed that modern southern belles do not have nor want careers and that they are only concerned with catching a man. Conversely, the next story that Grace shared addressed a time when someone used the term southern belle in a complimentary way. She related how some of her friends from the North called her a southern belle because of her accent and manners. She stated that they used it in a

positive way which made her think, “Yeah, I’m from the south. So, I should be a southern belle.” She took pride in being called a belle because it was related to positive characteristics associated with both definitions of the belle. In this way, the concept of the southern belle can take on both positive and negative connotations based on the term’s context in conversation.

Although the concept of the southern belle can have both positive and negative connotations in today’s culture, the “modern southern belle,” or southern belle social type, tends to have more of a positive perception; at least for participants in the two group interviews conducted and according to the *OED*’s current definition. As the responses to the group interviews were analyzed using evaluative methods of discourse analysis, positive “evaluative” words, such as adjectives, were present in much higher numbers than were negative characteristics (see Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1: Negative Evaluative Words**

Row Labels	Count of ITEM
+country	16
+stereotype	12
+basic	5
+she wants	2
+genuine	2
+fake	2
+abuse	1
+strategic	1
+expensive	1
+authentic	1
+wild	1
+gritty	1
+ditzzy	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>46</b>

*Table 1.* This table organizes a sample of words used by participants in the group interviews to describe a southern belle in a negative way or with a negative connotation.



**Table 2: Positive Evaluative Words**

⊕ goodkind	1
⊕ kindideal	1
⊕ comfortable	1
⊕ gracious	1
⊕ bubbly, kind	1
⊕ kind, gracious	1
⊕ Put together, together, gorgeous	1
⊕ mannerscarekind	1
⊕ hospitalitylady	1
⊕ well-rounded	1
⊕ involvedbeauty	1
⊕ prettykind	1
⊕ Put together, togetherprettymanners, beauty, kind	1
⊕ Put together, togetherelite	1
⊕ role model	1
⊕ involvedleader	1
⊕ tailored	1
⊕ together, all together, mannerskind, perfect	1
⊕ outreach	1
⊕ manners	1
⊕ young, lady	1
⊕ kind, popular	1
⊕ togetherkind	1
⊕ personable	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>211</b>

Table 2. This table organizes a sample of words used by participants in the group interviews to describe a southern belle in a positive way or with a negative connotation.

Although this positive perception may be partly due to the fact that the participants interviewed for this study currently live in the South, the *OED* does not label the definition of the southern belle as “derogatory” nor does it associate the term with a negative connotation. The *OED*’s redneck definition does, however, have a negative connotation and thus, a “derogatory” label when the word is looked up. If the southern belle’s perception today was predominantly derogatory, there should be a similar label on its definition.

### **Personal Perspectives and the Mirroring of Self**

Even as the historical definition and the social type definitions of the southern belle influence people’s current perceptions, people’s own experiences also shape how they view the southern belle. The southern belle then becomes a situated construct – one not objective in nature, but one that mirrors the perspective of the person holding that perception. In one of the group interviews,

Ellison demonstrated this when she described that not all belles need to be from a high socio-economic status. The participants had been discussing the word “classy” as representative of the southern belle and she said, “just taking the word, “classy” like, I don't think it necessarily has to be someone who is from like an elite socio-economic stand point.” She went on to explain that as long as a southern belle looks and acts like the typified social type of the southern belle, then anyone could be a southern belle. Interestingly enough, Ellison was the only participant in both interviews who believed the concept of the southern belle could be applied to someone of a lower socio-economic status, while also being the only participant who occupied the lowest socio-economic bracket. In this way, Ellison mirrored her own situation and projected that experience onto her perception of the concept of the southern belle.

Similarly, participants’ perceptions of the southern belle concept were also influenced by where they were born and raised. Although all participants, overall, used more positive words to describe the belle, Elizabeth used the most negative words while attributing her sometimes negative perception specifically to her identity as a northerner. In the interview, she began by qualifying her statement as “I’m from the North,” and that southern belles are generally perceived by northerners as “pretty, wealthy, and gets like whatever they want.” She then stated that “That's like what a southern Belle is from our outside stand-put and I think it can be used in not the nicest way.” Because of the negative connotations still sometimes tied to the person of the historical belle, these statements suggest that some northerners may still attribute some of the negative characteristics of the historic belle to their current perceptions today. In this way, Elizabeth’s identity and home region shaped her perception of the southern belle and was also reflected in her own description of the southern belle social type.

Furthermore, the participants' perception of the southern belle's race also reflected their own experiences as white Americans. Granted, the historic definition of the southern belle and its lasting influence may also play a role in why all the participants, at least in these groups, specifically described a southern belle as typically white. This does not negate, however, the fact that participants continued to reflect their own qualities and experiences onto their perception of the southern belle. In fact, one characteristic generally associated with the white race is blond hair; Margaret, Elizabeth, Ellison, and Grace all agreed that their perception of a southern belle included a woman who was "blond." Margaret stated that her mind "goes to that stereotype of like the blonde, like white [belle]." This specificity of hair color not only reinforces the racial disparity of the historic southern belle, but also illustrates how these participants mirrored their own personal characteristics onto their constructed perception of the belle.

Consequently, this same mirroring occurs in relation to the marital status and age of participants and their stated perceptions of the southern belle. Ellison, the only married participant in the interviews, stated first that southern belles were married. She only then changed that perception after other participants began to describe southern belles as "going to be married" or by saying that the belle is "desired by the many." In this way, Ellison's initial perception that the southern belle was married, with kids, and domestic, reflected her own experience as a southern woman. Similarly, the age of the participants was roughly similar to their perceived ages of southern belles. Elizabeth specifically described how she did not normally think of belles being married because the current population she was surrounded by were not married. Given the fact that Ellison realized how her current experiences shaped her perception, the situated construction of the southern belle becomes especially apparent. As



southern women continue to project their own subjective views onto the concept of the southern belle, its perceptions in southern culture will continue to change.

### **Move over Scarlett, There's a New Belle in Town**

At the beginning of this study, one of the expectations held by the researcher was that participants would use Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* as a way of describing their perceptions of a southern belle since most current literature on the topic address the character of Scarlett. This expectation was largely unmet in the two group interviews that were conducted. In fact, neither of the three participants in the first interview ever mentioned *Gone with the Wind* at all. Bob alluded to a possible description of Scarlett when he described a southern belle as "an old-timey picture" with "big fancy dresses," yet the actual image of Scarlett was not addressed. This lack of reference in the first group interview then suggests that someone or something else has begun to epitomize the concept of the southern belle in modern perception.

Some participants in the second group interview did address the character of Scarlett O'Hara unlike participants in the first. Nicole immediately began talking about how *Gone with the Wind* came to her mind when she first thought about a southern belle. She described the "big dresses and plantations estates" as indicative of the southern belle. Although the other participants agreed, they did not expound on that point. Once again, this lack of conversation concerning Scarlett O'Hara as the quintessential southern belle suggests that perhaps there is a new standard for modern perceptions of the southern belle. According to the participants in both group interviews, the South's new southern darling just happens to be another leading lady – Reese Witherspoon.

As participants in the group interviews described who they perceived to embody the concept of the southern belle today, they began to reference Reese Witherspoon as a "modern" southern

belle. Ellison hinted at the reason for this switch when she stated that “obviously people don’t wear those [big poofy dresses] today” and that she thinks of the “equivalent” to be Reese Witherspoon. Because modern southern culture is so different from the Old South, specifically in terms of dress, manners, women’s rights, and more, Scarlett does not seem to relevantly typify southern women’s experiences. Instead, Reese Witherspoon embodies many of the characteristics that participants perceive as indicative of the southern belle. Nicole described Reese Witherspoon as being “pretty, southern, and put together.” Grace described Reese Witherspoon as “blond, with an accent, and strong.” Although some of these characteristics used to describe Reese could also apply to Scarlett, this shift in who is perceived as the iconic southern belle marks a transition in modern perception. Contemporary women of the South, such as Reese Witherspoon, now fulfill the stereotypical definition of the southern belle more so than Scarlett could in this day and age. One might argue that this means that the southern belle is becoming irrelevant in today’s culture – but that is quite the contrary. For if the southern belle became obsolete, then southern women would not seek another example to take Scarlett’s place. Instead, Scarlett now takes her place as one of the social type southern belle figures. As perceptions of the belle continue to evolve, so also with the southern belle concept and social type.

### **Conclusion**

The American southern belle first began as a description for a woman in the Antebellum South who was white, wealthy, educated, and of courtship age. She was confined by specific societal expectations regarding her manners, behavior, and aims in life. She was destined to be the next plantation mistress, who would rule the household as the husband ruled her. When the Civil War broke out, the southern belle’s priorities shifted to survival instead of marriage as all

the men left to fight. Because southern belles did not want to give up the privilege associated with their position due to the institution of slavery, the belle transformed into the she-rebel (Jabour 1). The she-rebel disregarded the rules of society and flaunted their “patriotism” by speaking out against the North and utilizing both actions and language which would have typically been regarded as unladylike for a belle. When the war ended and slavery was abolished, the historic person of the southern belle died.

During reconstruction, the concept of the southern bell was resurrected to commemorate the Old South, albeit in a racist manner through Lost Cause narratives. Lost Cause narratives depicted the authors’ perceptions of the South and embodied those very perceptions in the characters of “southern belles.” In this way, southern belles exemplified the views of both Old South sympathizers and critics as the belle either represented the beautiful and graceful Old South or the broken and dark New South. This transformation in the concept of the belle allowed many different characteristics to be attributed to the southern belle and which gave rise to some of the social types of the southern belle that we currently possess. The southern belle’s transformation from a white, elite, single woman to a description for any woman no matter her race or social situation who wishes to identify as a belle, points to the radical change that converted the Old South to the South we know today.

In order to discover some of the modern perceptions of the belle, this study utilized a socio-linguistic approach where participants were asked questions concerning their perception of the southern belle and how they view the southern belle as a term in today’s culture. Looking at the participants’ responses using evaluative discourse analysis techniques, a few trends were uncovered concerning people’s perceptions of the southern belle. Analysis uncovered that there are currently two types of definitions of the southern belle circulating in modern discourse; the



first is the historic definition of the southern belle where the belle is a historic figure who is white, wealthy, educated, and unmarried. The “second” definition is fluid – for it is a social type definition shaped by individual’s own experiences and beliefs. For as broad circles of belief are generalized, social types arise and begin to generalize individual peoples’ perceptions as well. The second definition then is representative of the OED’s since it describes *typical* characteristics of the “modern” southern belle. The second definition differs specifically from the historic definition through its lack of specificity in regard to the belle’s marital status and race. Thus, the concept of the southern belle has many different perceptions based on a mix of the historic definition of the belle and social types.

Furthermore, although many modern perceptions of the belle are based on a stereotypical definition or social type image that circulates today, the southern belle takes on characteristics indicative of the person holding that perception. The southern belle is now a situated construct that mirrors the experiences of the person framing it. Thus, the term southern belle can be used both in a derogatory and complimentary nature, but its meaning in conversation is largely situated on the context in which it was used and the perception of the southern belle that is held by the person receiving that term in conversation. Participants’ perceptions of the southern belle were largely positive, even though there were a few negative words also used by participants to describe the belle. This suggests that the term southern belle may be generally viewed in a positive manner by some Americans, and at the very least by a sub-population at the University of South Carolina.

The concept of the southern belle may be looked upon in a favorable light today because it has been divorced, in part, from its origins rooted in slavery. One potential explanation for this shift stems from the character of Scarlett O’Hara. Although Scarlett is a deeply racist character in

both book and film, some viewers may choose to see Scarlett as more pro-feminist in nature instead of pro-slavery. In this way, Scarlett comes to embody a woman's strength and power, allowing some women to identify with her as a means of promoting a feminist mentality in southern culture. Scarlett, through her actions and words, becomes a model for femininity and women's rights when her own racist origin is looked over in favor of her other characteristics. The character of Scarlett then allows women to rally around her womanly virtues instead of her racist ideology. For even though Scarlett embodies what one might call a feminist, Scarlett too has become too dated to accurately represent southern womanhood today. Instead, today's culture has adopted other contemporary women as stand-ins for a modern southern belle because of qualities such as strength of character and southern heritage.

The *OED*, although providing one perception of the belle, does not encompass all perceptions of the belle at work in modern southern culture. Perhaps this definition would best be served by situating the definition in a way that points to the subjective nature of the southern belle concept. Just as the *OED* provides an "original" definition (see Glossary) of the redneck social type, the southern belle definition would be better defined using its original definition too. Then it could list a second definition, the stereotypical definition, as "general," just as the *OED* defines redneck (*OED Online*). Defining the southern belle in this way would not only give a more comprehensive view of the southern belle as a concept, but also give more insight into whether or not southern women would like to use this term as someone to identify with or to identify others with based on its controversial origin.

As hinted at in chapter 1 of this thesis, the concept of the southern belle has been used by African American women to describe themselves and their southern experience, thus incorporating yet another perception of the southern belle into modern discourse. This

perception, however, was not able to be explored in any sort of detail since the participants for this study all identified as white. This study then seeks to establish that it is possible for African American women to identify in this way, but ultimately leaves further research of this specific topic open for others to pursue. Recommendations for continuing this research might be to have a partner or team of people with diverse ethnic backgrounds work together so as to best collect perceptions of the southern belle by African Americans and other ethnicities in the American South. Due to the limitations of the participant pool and the researcher's own experiences, the continuation of this research might best be conducted by someone else.

Thus, there are two definitions of the southern belle at play today – the historic definition of the belle and the social type. Yet the *perception*, not definition, of the belle continually changes because of its situated construction by southern women. This allows women of all walks of life and of many different physical and behavioral characteristics to identify as a southern belle. Through the mirroring of self, the southern belle identity is now accessible to women who wish to be identified in this way. Because of the generally positive perception that people hold concerning the southern belle, as indicated by its usage, this study suggests that this term will remain in southern vernacular as long as southern women desire to identify with it. Although not all women may wish to be considered a southern belle, current Southern culture and ideologies are such that more women are willing to identify as a belle and will continue to reinvent the southern belle ideal to describe modern southern womanhood as long as it accurately reflects their own experiences.



## Glossary

### 1. Ideologies (Woolard):

Self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group.

### 2. Redneck (Oxford English Dictionary):

orig. *North American* (usually *derogatory*). Originally: a poorly educated white person working as an agricultural laborer or from a rural area in the southern United States, typically considered as holding bigoted or reactionary attitudes. Now also more generally: any unsophisticated or poorly educated person, *esp.* one holding bigoted or reactionary attitudes.

### 3. Southern Belle (Oxford English Dictionary):

an attractive, typically upper-class woman from the Southern states of the United States, *esp.* one perceived as having a wild, flirtatious, or steely character concealed beneath an outwardly demure appearance.

### 4. Stereotype (Cardwell):

a fixed, over-generalized belief about a particular group or class of people.

## Appendix

### List of Sample Interview Questions:

- Question 1: "Who is a southern belle?"
- Question 2: "What does a southern belle look like to you?"
- Question 3: "Who can be a southern belle?"
- Question 4: "Do you use the phrase "southern belle" in your everyday vocabulary?"
- Question 5: "Is there a difference between what you perceive as a historic southern belle and what or who you perceive as a southern belle today?"
- Question 6: "Does the southern belle need to be of a specific race?"
- Question 7: "Does a southern belle belong to a specific socioeconomic group?"
- Question 8: "Is a southern belle defined by her marital status?"
- Question 9: "Where do you find southern belles today?"
- Question 10: "How would you describe the qualities of a southern belle?"
- Question 11: "Do you know any southern belles? Can you describe them?"
- Question 12: "How do southern belles act and behave?"
- Question 13: "Are any of your friends southern belles?"
- Question 14: "How do southern belles talk?"
- Question 15: "How do southern belles dress?"
- Question 16: "How do southern belles behave?"
- Question 17: "What communities or social organizations do southern belles associate with?"
- Question 18: "What organizations on campus have the most southern belles?"
- Question 19: "Where do southern belles hang out?"

Question 20: "Is it a compliment to be called a southern belle?"

Question 21: "What does education look like for a southern belle?"



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